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### **MISJUDGING THE JIHAD / Like their leader, bin Laden's lieutenants are well educated, well traveled and well heeled**

John Arquilla

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Our attempts to reduce al Qaeda's flow of fresh recruits by spreading democracy and prosperity throughout the Muslim world are likely to backfire. That's partly because the political and military pressure that accompanies American-inspired "regime change" policies enrages many of the world's billion-plus Muslims, swelling the ranks of those who would oppose us.

But there is another big problem: We are shooting at the wrong target.

Over the years, al Qaeda cadres have generally not come from the pool of poor, semiliterate villagers who never ventured far from home and whose only education has been in religious schools, known as madrassas.

Instead, many of al Qaeda's fighters have been educated in first-rate universities, have been successful in a material sense and are well traveled.

Marc Sageman, a practicing psychiatrist and former CIA field agent who worked with the mujahedeen during their struggle against the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that ended in 1989, notes that about 80 percent of al Qaeda members were living away from their home country when they joined the jihad.

His in-depth study, "Understanding Terror Networks," is based on personal histories of more than a hundred leading members of al Qaeda and portrays a movement energized by worldly, smart, idea-driven operatives.

In this respect, personal profiles of al Qaeda recruits have often resembled their leader's. Osama bin Laden is well educated, comes from a background of great wealth, yet has sacrificed all to lead his network into battle against a coalition of nations.

Instead of quietly enjoying his fortune and his family, and basking in the glory of victory over the Russians in Afghanistan, he took up the jihad once more.

While few terrorists have such starkly dramatic backstories, bin Laden is hardly an exceptional case of a man giving up privilege and embracing peril. Indeed, many al Qaeda fighters have personal histories that echo his.

This is especially true of his second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician who gave up all hope of a prestigious, prosperous life for the jihadist cause. But even rank-and-file al Qaeda members have often come from upper-middle-class backgrounds.

Al Qaeda's "Hamburg cell," for example, was full of them. Mohammed Atta, who played a key role in the Sept. 11 attacks, studied architecture and finished his dissertation at the Technical University of Hamburg. Ziad Jarrah, who piloted the hijacked plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, studied aeronautical engineering at the University of Applied Sciences in the city. Another cell member, Saad Bahaji, came from a family with a father who was a secular Muslim and a successful businessman and a mother who was an educated German Christian.

And the list goes on. From Hamburg to its other cells around the world, al Qaeda's roster is replete with the educated and the dedicated.

It would be tempting to say that bin Laden reflects Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion that any institution is just "the lengthened shadow of one man."

But the fact is that Hezbollah and Hamas, two other vibrant Islamic activist networks, are also substantially comprised of bright, urbane volunteers impelled to fight by the depth of their belief in a cause.

Sometimes they do corral and cloister innocent young boys and groom them for suicide attacks, as was often the case in Gaza during the years when the Israelis kept military forces there. But the vast majority of those doing these networks' recruiting and operational planning are sophisticates.

In other words, al Qaeda's personnel profile is hardly anomalous. And the rapid spread of advanced information technology has only accelerated a trend toward generally more affluent jihadists.

Indeed, the fact that much recruiting is now being done over the Internet, through Web sites and e-mail, suggests that those joining the cause are far more likely to be logging on from a cyber cafe than listening to a radical imam spewing venom in some remote, mud-walled hut.

Beyond al Qaeda's own cells and nodes, which are distributed across about 60 countries today, its various affiliated groups show an interesting mix of urbane, educated operatives who sometimes join forces with the thugs and the urban poor of the Muslim world. Many of them inhabit developed countries, like Britain, home of the Tube and bus attackers of July 2005.

Groups like these are often advised by a skilled al Qaeda hand who has been trained to tamp down their differences and keep them focused on their common goals.

These affiliates have pulled off some spectacular attacks in the past several years -- in Bali and Madrid as well as London -- yet it should be noted that their reach is very short.

These terrorists cannot strike far from home, suggesting that even if our costly efforts to democratize and rebuild other nations actually succeeds, the United States won't really be any safer, because al Qaeda's regional affiliates simply can't pull off far-ranging intercontinental attacks.

Plus, the skilled operatives who can attack us are hardly dissuaded from their aims by our nation-building initiatives, which they see as more evidence of the United States' imperial ambitions.

With regard to the safety of American troops, their nation-building mission in Iraq has put them squarely in the sights of a peculiar al Qaeda affiliate led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

In this instance, the terrorist cell leader is atypical. Zarqawi is a high school dropout and small-time crook. On the other hand, many of his operatives are idealistic young men who were driven to the cause by the images they saw on jihadist Web sites of abuses at Abu Ghraib and the effects of "shock and awe" bombing on Iraqi civilians.

They have joined up not in response to their own impoverished circumstances, but rather from outrage at the suffering of their co-religionists in Iraq.

When they have felt impelled to take action, they have often sent messages over the Internet saying that they were going off to the war, and exhorting their cyber buddies to do the same.

Many even made farewell videotapes before they made suicide attacks. Indeed, the vast majority of the suicide videos that have been Webcast or broadcast feature well-spoken foreign fighters, not Iraqis.

Their behavior has inspired growing numbers to take the leap of joining up for the fight in Iraq. Once they have seen that other reasonable people can make such choices, they want to do so as well.

Psychologists label this phenomenon "social proof:" What others do, you can do, too. It's why counselors swarm high schools after a suicide. They know that such a death often validates the feelings of others who are also lonely or alienated, encouraging copycat suicides.

So it goes with jihadists who have made, or are making, their way to Iraq. They have seen what their virtual, cyberspace-based peers have done -- often in the most dramatic way -- and are determined to emulate them.

What, then, is to be done if our attempts to disrupt al Qaeda recruiting are for the most part aimed at the wrong demographic?

The answer is that we should begin by realizing that our enemies are not drawn from the ranks of the desperate, the destitute or the deluded.

Instead, they are principally driven to take action because of their considered opposition to our policies, their outrage at our behavior toward detainees and by the large numbers of noncombatants who have been killed in our air attacks.

If we can but see this, then perhaps we will stop trying to remake the Muslim world politically and economically. We will stop thinking that slicker messages on our Arab-language radio and television programs will make everything come out right.

For in the end, the best way to reduce terrorist recruiting is not to try, so clumsily, to change our adversaries' minds, but rather to look deeply and honestly into our own hearts and embrace three much-needed changes.

First, we must treat those whom we take as prisoners according to the laws of war, regardless of how heinous we believe their actions have been.

Second, we must rapidly and substantially reduce our conventional forces in Iraq. This will reassure Muslims and non-Muslims alike of our intentions to restore that country's full sovereignty.

Third, we should offer amnesty to insurgents, in Iraq and elsewhere, in return for their pledge to stop fighting.

These steps will extricate us from our current ethical morass; save us from suffering thousands more casualties and squandering billions more dollars; and remind us, the world and even our most zealous foes that even in the midst of conflict there is a way to begin creating peace.

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